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Visual Literacy and Library Instruction: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of visual literacy and its implications for librarians teaching information literacy components. The author concludes that, while visual teaching methods should be incorporated in library instruction, teaching visual literacy competencies is most effectively done in connection with discipline-specific content and thus falls outside librarians' role.

Introduction

In our fast-paced era of media blips and bytes, visual images and symbols have now more than ever an immediate and frequent presence in our culture. Technological advances resulting in new media types have dynamically altered traditional modes of communication. Choices for producing and consuming information are vast, and formats from standard text to graphical interfaces, digitized images, streaming video and hypermedia have created a complex and layered system of information flow.

Information is no longer bound by text or simple illustrations since technological innovations have created a rich visual culture, impacting business, education and social environments (New London Group, 1994; Walker & Chaplin, 1997). Making sense of visual images and symbols requires more than just passive observation, but rather a new competency - visual literacy - to understand, analyze and "read" the essence of these images (Abilock, 2003). "Reading" visual images in this sense also requires "integrating other sensory experiences" according to the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA). It is quite clear that as technology becomes "obsolete, evolves and expands," the increasingly intricate visual world demands a skill to interpret these messages beyond sheer observation (Walker & Chaplin, 1997).

Visual literacy is not necessarily a "new" concept, but it has transformed into a more formalized area of study in both the K-12 environment and higher education. From a theoretical perspective, visual images and symbols have become so integrated and important in our social structure and identity that understanding the effects of our image-rich world has resulted in a new field of study in academe: Visual Culture Studies (Walker & Chaplin, 1997). On a more practical level, visual literacy has become part of the curriculum by virtue of technology-enhanced resources, thus expanding the range of visual teaching tools with graphics, videos or web sites being incorporated into classroom lectures and library instruction (Wiley & Hemmerich, 2003).
While, traditionally, librarians have dealt primarily with text-based information, recent changes in technology have led to a gradual shift. With images and symbols playing an increasingly important role, and with educators calling for the development of visual literacy, librarians need to ask what their role should be in all of this. Just as various facets of literacy, such as information literacy, have been of concern to librarians, should librarians now get involved with the newly emerging area of visual literacy, and what should be the nature of such involvement? While this question raises a number of issues, the purpose here is to provide a broader perspective from

which to launch a discussion of the librarian's role with respect to the increasing importance of visual literacy. Specifically, this article focuses on two questions: First, should librarians be involved in teaching visual literacy? Second, should librarians tailor instruction toward visual learning styles?

What Is Visual Literacy?

Attempts to define visual literacy in more depth are made difficult by the lack of an accepted definition among experts. While definitions of visual literacy do exist in the literature, the meaning varies depending on the context in which it is grounded.

One recent study attempted to arrive at a definition of visual literacy by surveying experts in the field (Brill, Kim & Branch, 2001). While the responses to the survey were not conclusive, they led the authors to suggest the following consensus definition. Visual literacy encompasses a …

> group of acquired competencies for interpreting and composing visible messages. A visually literate person is able to: (a) discriminate and make sense of visible objects as part of a visual acuity; (b) create static and dynamic visible objects effectively in a defined space; (c) comprehend and appreciate the visual testaments of others; and (d) conjure objects in the mind's eye. (p. 6)

Working from the premise that visual literacy is a group of acquired competencies, Eisenberg, Lowe and Spitzer (2004) briefly discuss visual literacy from a larger framework familiar to the library profession – the research agenda for library instruction and information literacy, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000). The research agenda outlines research questions related to instruction in academic libraries. Based on the ideas of Moore and Dwyer (1994) and Wileman (1980), Eisenberg, et al, regard visual literacy as a core model comprised of three main concepts: visual learning, visual thinking and visual communication. They further describe these three concepts as the ability to construct meaning from visual experiences (visual learning), organize information based on the composition of images (visual thinking), and use symbols to express meaning (visual communication).

Marcum (2002), a scholar in the library and information science field, takes a more far-reaching view of visual literacy. He challenges the library profession to move away from the "information-processing paradigm" and to consider a visual ecology system that he defines as "a comprehensive and continuous participatory event, a universe of action, and a world of knowledge and learning rather than of information transfer" (p. 189). In simple terms, Marcum suggests the profession rethink its current "text-based" philosophy and move toward a new system that is more grounded in the visual and interactive technologies of today.

It is clear from these few examples that visual literacy carries different meanings depending on the contextual framework. Despite these variations, and for the purpose of this article, visual literacy in its broadest sense will be understood as the processes by which images are constructed, organized and expressed to communicate meaning, as well as the competencies associated with these processes. Before discussing whether librarians should be involved in visual literacy it is important to look at how competency in this area is taught.

How Is Visual Literacy Taught?

Teaching visual literacy goes beyond learning a specific set of skills, but it is rather a social practice that looks at how images are created and communicated (Bamford, 2003). Images are forms of visual communication represented in any medium, such as film, television, advertising, digital images, graphic-enhanced designs or photographs to name a few. Students develop visual literacy as they engage in the study of images or objects for their form, structure, symbols, cultural representation and social interactions (Bamford; Messaris, 2001). The implications of teaching visual literacy, as expressed by Bamford, include the development of critical thinking skills, understanding image and manipulation techniques, examining design principles, and analyzing embedded codes and conventions within images.

There are numerous examples of how visual literacy has been integrated into curriculum

models in both K-12 and higher education environments. Paul Messaris, a leader in the field of visual education, uses film making to get students to think about how subjects and images are portrayed and if these representations are contrived, manipulated or real. He finds this technique effective in examining the process of visual literacy from both the consumer and producer perspective. The implications for visual literacy, he says, become an active process where students "…move beyond the use of visual media as simple 'windows on reality' to an actively oriented visual education" (Messaris, 2001).

Another example of teaching visual literacy is George's (2002) composition class using "visual arguments" in place of the traditional written paper. She assigns a "visual argument" based on course readings. Although the argument uses any form or medium decided upon by the student, such as a new book jacket, map, chart, web page, flyer, painting, collage or diagram, the visual form still requires the elements of making and supporting a claim with evidence. One student, for example, based her argument on the reading of "King Leopold's Ghost." She decided to redesign Leopold's Congo Free State flag to illustrate how she interpreted what Europe *really* brought to Congo. Some colleagues questioned George's method that her "visual argument" assignment did not equal the same "weight" as a written paper. She contends that students are engaged in a "technology-saturated and image-rich culture, and that questions of communication and composition absolutely include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them" (p. 32).

Should Librarians Teach Visual Literacy?

Instruction, both formal and informal, has always been a function of librarians whether it is direct or indirect, within or outside the classroom, a "one shot" session or a full credit-course. Library orientation, bibliographic instruction and information literacy are frequently used terms to describe the teaching functions of librarians. While the fundamental aspects of these terms have been debated in the library literature, especially with regard to information literacy, the bottom line is that many of the practical functions within these models overlap - regardless of how the term has been "repackaged" in the profession.

Despite the relative ease with which information is now available online, the complexity of technology makes library instruction far from obsolete. Interfaces change, databases appear (and sometimes disappear), journals are discontinued or no longer available online, and new meta-search facilities are introduced which still do not cover all information sources. Students struggle to sift through this "stuff" trying to make sense of it all so that they can get the information needed for their paper, presentation or exercise. Serving as partners, supporters or collaborators with faculty, librarians respond to this situation by teaching technical skills and evaluative competencies in connection with course objectives and assignments.

It is not uncommon for academic librarians to teach semester long credit courses that focus on foundations of information literacy or library research methods. Librarians create instructional materials using the technology of the day, such as Web-based tutorials, subject specific Web directories, research tutorials, pathfinders or bibliographies. The design, implementation and methodology of instruction vary depending on the nature of what needs to be accomplished. Typically, librarians concentrate on the concepts and mechanics of identifying, searching, accessing and evaluating appropriate information utilizing different technologies (Dewald, 1999; ACRL, 2000).

Among the characteristics that Dewald considers to be "good library instruction" is the linking of library instruction with course- or assignment-related objectives and activities. In the same vein, McDonald (2004) argues that if instruction in information literacy is connected through a context tied to a discipline or a specific assignment, then the respective competencies are taught in isolation, and the instruction is ineffective. Plausible as this argument is for instruction in information literacy, does it is also apply to the teaching of visual literacy? If so, what does it mean for the librarian's role?

If information literacy should be tied to the content covered in students' classes and their respective assignments, then the call for such

connection should be considered equally valid with regard to the teaching of visual literacy. This statement does not imply, however, that *librarians* should get involved in the teaching of visual literacy. On the contrary, teaching visual literacy goes beyond the librarian's role—for the following reason: unlike the concept of information literacy, the concept of visual literacy revolves around the content analysis of images, their meaning, not so much about the technical skills of finding them and their qualitative evaluation in terms of authenticity, currency, etc. Teaching in a discipline-specific context thus takes on different meanings for library literacy and visual literacy. For the former, it means teaching search and source-evaluation skills; for the latter, it means using images as information sources and making sense out of them by critically analyzing their meanings. While involvement in the former task is generally considered to be an essential aspect of librarianship, involvement in the latter falls within the exclusive domain of the subject instructor, not the librarian. Teaching how images (such as a political poster dating back to the French Revolution) are constructed, organized or expressed to communicate meaning goes as much beyond the role of librarians as the teaching of any other discipline-specific content (such as Robespierre's concept of liberty). No one would, or should, expect librarians to take on this task.

While the above argument arrives at the conclusion that librarians should not teach discipline-specific content, the use of visual components in library instruction is a different issue to be addressed in the following section.

Tailoring Instruction toward Visual Learning Styles

The proliferation of technology-enhanced resources has fundamentally changed instruction methods in many academic disciplines. Technologies used in classrooms today, whether traditional, distance education or hybrid courses, range from standard applications, such as Microsoft PowerPoint to more complex multimedia, such as streaming desktop video capture. More and more teachers now require students to use these tools in connection with their assignments, papers or presentations.

New technologies have created opportunities for new, innovative teaching methods that accommodate individual learning styles and thus provide more flexibility in student learning (Tyckoson and Jacobson, 1993). While the concept of "learning style" is a relatively old idea, it still bears much currency. Rita and Kenneth Dunn's (1993) definition of learning style is how an individual concentrates, processes, internalizes and remembers academic content. Most recently, Denig (2004) picks up this definition and discusses the authors' 21 elements that model learning style preferences, including the perceptual element pertaining to students who learn best by *seeing* complex material.

The discussion of learning styles in the context of the classroom, brick-and-mortar or virtual, is typically tied to the idea of presenting class content in multiple formats in order to provide effective instruction to all students, no matter what their learning styles may be. For example, Wiley and Hemmerich (2003) and Dewald (1999) emphasize the importance of utilizing multimedia in the classroom: By providing multiple representations of the same information, multimedia-based instruction can accommodate the needs of students with verbal, visual or auditory learning styles. The authors also describe specific types of information, such as maps, charts and diagrams that require visual representation in order to be understood. Focusing on information literacy, Brown, Murphy and Nanny (2003) argue that instruction must provide for visual and other learning style preferences in order to be effective.

The recent ACRL research agenda reflects a greater emphasis on learning styles in library instruction than before (ACRL, 2000). According to Dalrymple (2002), who surveyed instruction librarians to determine whether they were utilizing learning style theory in their teaching, results had a mixed answer. The survey found that librarians were generally aware of learning styles (visual and others), but that they were uncertain about how to adapt their instruction to the diverse learning styles in the classroom setting. Her study also found that librarians typically use lecture-style formats and computer demonstrations of searching OPACs, databases and the Web, tailored to course assignment objectives. Some of the respondents indicated that they

lacked ideas on how to incorporate other technologies outside the standard computer demonstration into the "one-shot" 50-minute instruction session. Despite this concern, most respondents were enthusiastic about experimenting with new technologies to accommodate diverse learning styles in the classroom. Dalrymple concluded that librarians, now more than ever, are focused on student learning.

Templeman-Kluit and Ehrenberg (2003) provide a current example on how to meet visual learning preferences. Based on their experiences at the Bobst Library at New York University (NYU), they recognized the need for better methods to reach distance learners and to enhance library instruction through a more visual mode. The authors wanted to create a "human form of online instruction." After a few trials and errors, they took an existing text-based HTML tutorial, "How to find a book" and, using a product called Camtasia, created a streaming media component with voiceover narration. Once this was accomplished, they transformed other online tutorials and experimented with new technologies, such as Flash MX, to create higher quality images and enhanced interactivity for students.

Judged by its discussion in the literature, the attention given to it within the ACRL research agenda, Dalrymple's survey, as well as real-world projects (of which the one at Bobst Library is just one example), it is clear that the issue of students' preferences for certain learning styles, and the need to tailor instruction to those, are on the radar screen of instruction librarians. As Jacobson & Ignacio (1997) point out, adapting to students' visual learning styles is not accomplished necessarily through a prescribed method, but rather through a flexible approach that is more intune to the individual development of students. Ways in which this is being practiced is evident in NYU's progressive effort to create innovative tutorials utilizing the most current technology to meet the needs of users with visual (and auditory) learning styles (Templeman-Kluit and Ehrenberg, 2003).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss whether librarians should be involved in visual literacy, and, if so, what form this involvement should take. Teaching visual literacy - the processes by which images are constructed, organized and expressed to communicate meaning - goes beyond the librarian's role. Pertinent competencies are most effectively taught in connection with courses in subject-specific disciplines, such as history, physics, business, cultural studies etc. However, librarians should continue to make ample use of visual teaching methods, thereby accommodating their instruction to the visual learning style that, in the current age of multimedia technology, may work best for many, if not most, of the students.

The discussion of "visual literacy" and its implication for librarianship in this article is not meant to be exhaustive. Of future questions yet to be addressed, only two shall be mentioned here. First, are current trends in collection development adequate in light of the important role of images as information carriers? Second, how can the greater emphasis on visual teaching methods be balanced with the needs of those students who learn most effectively by non-visual means—be it because of their "learning style" or because of a sensory (visual) impairment?

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